
THE 2025 O:JA&L CHAPBOOK SERIES
A Writer's Portfolio

HAVE NOT



STEVE GERSON

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celebrating the publication of Steve Gerson's PDF collection of haibun and short poems.

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PREFACE

We live in a world of billionaires. They, the *haves*, own two yachts because one wouldn't be large enough. They fly on private jets to exotic resorts, build bunker getaways on Fiji or New Zealand to escape an apocalypse, live in four mansions in the world's major cities, have exclusive visits to the Pope in Rome, and own hobby tequila plantations.

But, others, far too many, the *have nots*, work full-time jobs and still live under the poverty line. They drive on bald tires, skip essential operations because they don't have enough medical coverage, double mortgage their trailer homes, and scrimp but never save since money is scarce.

These flash fiction vignettes, Fibonacci, haibun, haiku, and poetry focus on the have nots. Let me tell you their stories.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“The Girl with a Tattooed Heart” / *WildSound*
“After 10 days roughnecking Oklahoma oilfields” / *Panophlyzine*
“Autonomic, Again” / *CafeLit*
“A Modern Epistolary” / *Bookends*
“Venom” / *In Parentheses*
“Barbed” / *South Florida Poetry Journal*
“woman suffocating under skyless clouds” / *Variant*
“Divorce Proceedings, Case #2029” / *In Parentheses*
“Her dress once pink” / *Abstract*
“Addiction” / *Down in the Dirt*
“Phantom” / *Wingless Dreamer*
“Screamscape” / *Vermilion*
“Calendar Pages Yellowing” / *Panophlyzine*
“Chemotherapy: A Love Story” / *The Listening Eye*
“Gone” / *Scapegoat*
“Hank in Hospice” / *CafeLit*
“Sunset Diorama” / *Big Bend Literary Journal*
“Terminal” / *Contemporary Haibun Online*
“Elizabeth Meets Darcy at the 7-11” / *Wingless Dreamer*
“Love/Loveless” / *Bookends*
“The Weight of Want” / *In Parentheses*
“Women’s History 101” / *CafeLit*
“Truck Stop” / *CafeLit*
“Progress” / *Snapdragon*
“Self Portrait as Hologram” / *Panophlyzine*
“Photo Albums” / *Vermilion*
“Like snakeskin glistening on the beach” / *Contemporary Haibun Online*
“Afterthought” / *Nunum*
“Sepia” / *Quibble*
“Snapshot, Mary in the Old Folk’s Home, Christmas 2023” / *Wingless Dreamer*
“Stars Aching in Distant Skies” / *Down in the Dirt*
“Sunshine enters like a hesitant guest” / *CafeLit*

“Abandon” / *In Parentheses*
“A Truck in Snow” / *Zoetic Press*
“Pressure” / *Vermilion*
“Posted” / *Panophyzine*
“Maybe hope” / *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*
“Loneliness” / *MusePie*
“Waxing Moon” / *In Parentheses*
“And the morning sun trailed her bus in shadows” / *Down in the Dirt*
“At Midnight” / *South Florida Poetry Journal*
“Only geese fly straight lines” / *Untenured*
“Pale Green and Garnet” / *NiftyLit*
“Black Stones” / *Panophyzine*
“Eight to Five, Forever?” / *CafeLit*

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DEDICATION

A TEXT MESSAGE FOR SHARON

as we begin
there's always you
waning moonglow
dew glistening in the
rising sunshine

RELATIONSHIPS

*“No,” she said. “No,” he
mocked, miscommunication—
breaking teeth on bone.*



THE GIRL WITH A TATTOOED HEART

2:36 a.m.

"I want," she wrote in her laptop journal, her fingers pecking at the keyboard like a bird seeking seeds. "I want sunshine. I want robins, daffodils, parades with balloons, a glass of red wine over a candlelit dinner. I want to hold someone's hand," as ice droplets froze on her bedroom window. She picked up her handheld from the nightstand to read his text, again. "This isn't working, Jen." Four words after their eight months together. In the second month, she said, "I think you're the one, Jim." He smiled and nodded. At the fourth month, she said, "I love you, Jim." He smiled and nodded. At month seven, she asked, "What can I do, Jim?" He shrugged and looked away. She wondered why she wasn't enough. She wondered how else she could have made him happy, as she tugged at the bandage covering her left forearm, her nails bitten and bloodied around red cuticles. She pried one edge of the gauze up and pulled it from the scabs of her newly inked arm, decorated with a heart and two initials, J & J. Jen read his four-word text, again, then she turned off the handheld and shut her laptop, the light extinguishing like a flower closing. The ice on her window started to melt in rivulets like exclamation points.

2:47 a.m.

CONFESSIONS OF A SOCIAL MEDIA MISFIT

“FOMO is no LOL (sad face emoji),” he wrote in his online journal app hoping that everyone would like his secret thoughts. “I mean, I follow her every day, every hour, going sleepless, Mom yelling ‘turn it off!’ ignoring Mom, chugging Red Bull with a chaser of Jolt and swigs of Mountain Dew for dessert. I missed studying for my Psych(o) test, again, and sure I tried a bit of playful cyberbullying, but no harm there, right? She was getting on my nerves, always more pins, more likes, more thumbs up than my feeds, feeding my aggression, I guess. I’m tired, becoming fuzzy-brained staring into this void that pulls me down like an undertow into the third circle of Hell.

*Swallowing ego,
my esophagus strangled
breathing rejection.*

Wait. I’ve got to check an incoming text. Ok, back now. Just my Dad sending me a photo of him and his third wife and their kids (my step sibs, I guess) from their vacation in San Diego.

Wait. She just updated her social photo. Damn! More followers. She’s got 7,000+. How’s that even possible? Our school only has 1,000 students, and I’m at 56 followers (Wait, what? I’m down to 55 now. Someone just unfriended me!).

I’m depressed, as blue as the *cyanea lamarkii* jellyfish (trust me, it’s blue. I saw it when I was surfing the net, though I should have been studying Psych(o), and it’s spineless, and it just floats aimlessly with toxic tentacles. I wish I had toxic tentacles.).

*A predator hides
behind screams of hate.
Distant lightning nears.*

Uh oh. She logged off. Now what can I do? I'm empty, alone in my dark room in the green glare of my monitor. I'm unplugged from her, stalking, addicted, and mainlining meta air. I can't sleep.

Who else can I troll tonight?"

Electrical coils
plugged into the ethernet—
Snakes in the garden.

AFTER 10 DAYS ROUGHNECKING OKLAHOMA OILFIELDS

he's driving toward me
not as fast as electricity
sizzles through bowing lines
or stanchions erect ringing
the curvature of the earth
but with the same hum
of high-voltage energy
discharging corroded rust
on sun riven roads
his approach anticipatory
bringing either heat that touches
me like his grasp on a longneck bottle
fingers thrumming or the rumble
of distant clouds thundering
on the horizon to crush me
like a beer can tossed carelessly
in his pickup's dusty bed

AUTONOMIC, AGAIN

"I'm sorry, Jennie," he said, again, for the twentieth time that week, maybe for the twentieth time that hour. He'd lost track.

She shook her head, saying, "Your sorries don't work anymore, Jack. They're like the loose change I find under the couch cushions, next to lint and dead skin. You say it so often that it's like your breaths taken, your heartbeats, without thought, without feeling. It's autonomic, Jack."

"I'm sor . . . ," he almost said, his autonomic reflexes sparking in spasms. He had become a jangle of ganglia, more random nerve cells than sentient being. "Jennie, I mean it. No more. It'll never happen again. Honest."

"Autonomic," she said. "Do you even know what you're sorry for this time?"

He paused, as if stuck at a crossroad with oncoming traffic, all targeted toward colliding with him. As if he were an addled air traffic controller at Houston's Hobby Airport with 50 planes stacking up to land in heavy fog. "Uh," he paused again, running through possibilities, then mentally ticking off items like a cashier at a checkout lane. Maybe this sorry was because he kept talking at the movie yesterday, peeving those around him. Maybe because he left the kitchen light on all night, again. Maybe because he kept her awake with his snoring, but how would he know? He was asleep, damn it. How was he supposed to control himself during REM moments? Maybe because he lost \$100 at poker last Tuesday with his buddies (really it was \$250, a tiny lie, he thought). Maybe because he had covertly ogled the cute waitress at Sunday brunch when she delivered his third Bloody Mary with an extra shot of vodka and two strips of bacon. Maybe because he forgot Jennie's birthday, again, but she always said she hated getting older. He just didn't want to remind her. "I was being thoughtful," he said out loud, autonomically, more like an involuntary hiccup than a reasoned thought.

"What?" Jennie asked. "Thoughtful? Wishful thinking Jack. That's the problem. Thoughtlessness is more your speed. In fact, that's all I'm asking for,

thoughtfulness. Think of me, Jack, not just yourself. "

"I'm sorry, Jennie," he said, again, for the twentieth time that week, maybe for the twentieth time that hour.

A MODERN EPISTOLARY

Jane,

I've been thinking of you lately. I'm sorry our relationship ended as it did. We were so sympatico, always in the same orbit, my sun to your moon. Remember when we walked the Plaza that April day? We stopped for ice cream, some of the chocolate dripping down your chin. I wiped it off with my sleeve so your white dress wouldn't smear. Pretty gallant, huh? We laughed about your job as a hairdresser and the weird people you'd meet, that dude with a mohawk and nose rings, the chick with seven colors of hair like a mood ring gone psycho, the grandma with blue hair and perm ringlets so tight her brain was starved for thought. Are you still working there (I can't imagine why)? How's your mom, that old witch? Man, she hated me, though all I ever did was treat her with respect. Anyway, I miss you, hence this text. Yeh, I left suddenly, but you know how my job is—big things to do, important places to see. Do you still have my CDs, especially the Guns N' Roses we both loved. I'll always think of "Sweet Child of Mine" as our song. You take "me away to that special place." I'm going to be in town next week. Want to hook up, Babe?

Jim,

Next week, don't call, don't text, don't drop by my house, don't come near me or my friends. In fact, I'd prefer you avoid my zip code. Let me correct several of your misconceptions. First, that April on the Plaza, I told you I didn't want to go, that I had my April hay fever, but you, of course, ignored my wishes. There we were, out in a windstorm, me sneezing, wheezing, coughing, and feeling awful. When you took us into the ice cream place to order, I tried to remind you of my lactose intolerance. You ignored me. And who uses a sleeve to wipe up anything? Were you raised under some bridge by trolls? Oh, my dress was red, not white, BTW. Thanks for remembering. Second, my job. You always put me down for "only" being a stylist. As if your job as a roadie for a garage band was brain surgery, you toting amps, plugging in guitars, picking up the band's trash after a gig at the local dive. I worked hard for my license, and

my clients are like family to me. I value the "dude," the "chick," the "grandma." They trust me with their appearances, and I try to meet their expectations with professionalism. Finally, mom died last month after a courageous struggle against leukemia. She was worth about twelve million of you, Jim. Several of my friends and I got together after you left on the band's road trip, one whole state over. We celebrated your absence by drinking watermelon vodka spritzers and burning your damn disks. The Guns N' Roses' CD burned into cinders, your sun eclipsed by my moon, especially after I doused it with lighter fluid. I was never your child, your baby girl, your sweetie pie, your pumpkin, your doll. So no, we won't be hooking up. PS—I've blocked you, unpinned you, unfriended you. It's all thumbs down, "Babe."

VENOM

He was coiled.
Others saw passivity,
mistakenly, but behind
his hooded eyes peered
deception. Within his barred
mouth, fangs dripped beads of
venom tearing at my trust.
When he said, “I’m sorry, babe.
She didn’t mean anything to me.
It’ll never happen again,” I felt
the hiss of his tongue flicking
the air for the scent of his next
infidelity.

BARBED

The barbed wire strung between the pine poles sang
like a guillotine in the November gusts. Cattle lowing,
plaintive, huddled near the fallen post oak, felled

by lightning strikes, the night air still sizzling with
ashen embers and despair. I saw slivers of the moon
behind a black cloud in the black sky, the pale light

leaching like spoiled milk. “Not now, Claire,” he said,
his words pulled like a rusted nail from a dry board.
I thumbed a loose thread around the tear in my worn dress.

“When?” I asked, the cattle still calling in the fields amid
more lightning flashes. He turned and stared. “Not ever,”
as the backdoor slammed, its wire screen shuddering.

WOMAN SUFFOCATING UNDER SKYLESS CLOUDS

bovine in her way
dressed uniformly in muddied russet
glazed cow-stare straight
like vacant windows in farm outbuildings
black as eyeless sockets

she endures self-stockaded
as if muzzling stray blades
of grass on barren browned fields
downward gazing under leafless trees
every day a late fall

not always so numbed
she once effervesced
I recall her eyes uplifted yearning
after passing planes flying elsewhere
contrails etching sun-streaked paths

but life intervened siloing her
a romance denied her moans lowing
a career curtailed cowering
friendships family all plowed under
climate changes in her soul

till tariffed by slights her sights low
she ruminates suffocating under skyless clouds

BEYOND THE HORIZON, MAYBE

An Ekphrastic based on Andrew Wyeth's Christina's World

Her arms bent like brackets to support other's will, never her own. Her back bowed into an S, supine, struggling. Her body was smothered by the land as if kudzu vines strangled her. It was noon on the farm, and the sun cast shadows on her body like bones picked clean by turkey vultures.

"Hand me that saw, Christina, won't you?" George asked, demanded more like it. "You better milk that dang cow, Chris. Can't you hear it bellowing, it's udders about to burst?" he said, but what he was thinking, she assumed, was at least little Joe can get his milk from the cow, since you went dry as a leaky well long time past. "Hey girl, I'm going into town this afternoon. Got some business to tend to. I need you to pick cotton while I'm gone. It ain't gonna pick itself. I know it shreds your hands like a thresher. Maybe you ought to put on my work gloves, you think?"

Going into town for business. Not hardly, she thought. He'll stop by McWard's tavern to sip on cheap, watered down 3-2 beer. He'll lose money at pool, my money mostly, the cash I earned by canning summer corn and squash. He'll spend time with her, that Delilah, with her henna-red hair, her lips like just picked beets, her body all curves. Not like mine, flat as a plowed field, planed straight as raw wood. Then he'll come home, stinking of beer, smelling of her.

Christina, weighed down by clouds, wore a dress once pink, now washed as colorless as amoebic platelets. She looked to her right toward the eastern edge of their sharecropped property, toward their farmhouse. It slumped into the ground, grayed by withering winds. To her left, toward the western boundary, was their barn, stranded like a lost calf. Between the two structures was a thin line, dissecting the land from the high sky like skin sliced by a well-honed sodbuster knife.

"Beyond here is a horizon," she thought, "maybe."

DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS, CASE #2029

Barometric pressure twisting between invective and indifference, he, for her, was like breathing the hot dry air of Arizona, scalding, his heat an acetylene torch in her throat, like breathing swamp humidity in Louisiana, each breath breathless, so her lungs strained, gasping like a beached fish, gill quivered. Loveless, his arms withheld from her as if he were a Greek statue lopped limbless by marauding infidels stealing her belief. She had tried standing tall on Doric columns, their filigreed flutes and fillets her fragile strength, but he, like seawater salt, like acid rains, eroded her resolve into fissures, and she, as glass blown in fire and air, a bowl to carry water, blue as sustenance, stream fed, shattered under his burden, water evaporating into rock dry sand.

HER DRESS ONCE PINK

a harrier hawk on a snow-mounded fence
a murder of crows on gray wind
shocks of yellow winter wheat on the periphery
fields bleeding into the horizon

she said surrounded by absence
the air a hole consuming sound
our nearest neighbors only dust plumes conversing
while you work the land

feel soil warm your soles
blacken your fingers coiling around roots
to coax growth out of riven sod
breeze swirling around you in embrace

I grow emptiness
my face a dry well
my palms etched like drought-baked clay
my bones wearing a dress once pink

now the color of leeches corpuscles
cracking like shards of cut wheat
shafts underfoot in our frozen field
where you shoot pheasant

obscured by a windbreak of barbed locust
I'm in your grandpa's house
built by prior generations
of seekers who left leaving motes

ILLNESSES

*The diagnosis—
his psyche wincing in pain—
shattered synapses*



ADDICTION

I need. I'm boiling from the inside.
My skin is crevassed with volcanic eruptions.
My tracks map Odysseus' tortured trek from Troy to Ithaca,
beset by witches and beasts and a god's curse.
I'm feeling like a man wracked in the trenches
of Dante's 8th circle, wanting. Ravished with tattooed
skin glyphs swarming like locusts in Exodus, a biblical
plague assaults my body. But then the pin prick of juice
slithers into my veins like a melody of fire,
and I swirl into an oblivion of ice.

PHANTOM

1.

Trails
of
sawdust
dementia
termite ridden
his mind losing time
a rusting structure eroding
and what was once a man became empty edifice

2.

Not
all
at once
slowly as
crosscut tree rings gnawed
exposed to toxic DNA
and what was once a man became nubs, whittled splinters

3.

A
house
foreclosed
keys returned
what a man became
when losing his identity
inch by inch like an amputated leg's phantom pain

SCREAMSCAPE

Can you tell me about your dream?" the VA hospital psychologist asked.

Dream, I thought. *Not quite the word I'd use*. Dreams always implied wishes and cotton candy and big-ass red Corvettes and Tahiti and tiny umbrellas in coconut drinks and beautiful babes and children flying kites in April and money. I wasn't having dreams.

Each night for the past eight months since out-processing, leaving Afghanistan, shedding the heat like sheep sheared of their winter coats, seeing the sand diminish from the DMZ like time lost, the portholes of my transport plane misting in misery, I landed in nightmare.

Here's what I had earned in my tour of duty: Sergeant's stripes stitched on my sleeves, a purple heart hung around my neck, PTSD pinned to my chest like a service medal, and night terrors buried in my brain like IEDs stuffed inside a dog's carcass.

Each night, I'd hear the howls of shattered bones sprouting from the desert like death totems, see blood dripping from splintered words spoken through mouths of broken teeth, taste the smell of cordite sizzling torrid air, feel my fingernails ripping through hope like skin shredding on concertina, touch shrieks of cluster bombs dappling my conscience like hypodermic needles. And see them, victims of war. The men beside me on dirt trails that wound like intestinal coils through cold mountains. The villagers who saw our presence as ghoul, eating their valleys like flesh.

Each night my head screamed. Each night I turned my sheets into wet gauze, encasing my body in surgical bandages. Each night my eyes blared red like sirens. Each night my blood pulsed through my veins like rotor wash. Each night I woke shouting dead men's names, this my Cocteau Rimbaud screamscape. Each day I feared the next night.

After waiting for a response, the psychologist asked again. "Can you tell me about your dream, Sergeant?"

I reached into my back pocket for a handkerchief, raised it to dab at sweat pocking my forehead like shrapnel, brought the cloth down quickly to wipe away a tear I hoped the doctor had not seen, and said, "No. I can't remember anything."

CALENDAR PAGES YELLOWING

I creaked up the back porch stairs and
opened and slammed the torn screen door
and swatted away a buzzing fly the memory
of a past day gone with picnics near
the fallow fields the whining wail of harmonicas
and hand churned ice cream cherry or peach
the pits and stones breaking teeth
and walked into the kitchen dark
from blinds drawn and eyes shut
to recent sickness and palsied hands.
Mom stood at the farmhouse sink
calendar pages yellowing a glass
of milky water filled and tilting up
to take a swig her other hand holding pills
too many for her nighttime dose.
Out the window barely cracked
I caught a glimpse of tractors stilled
leafless trees and murderous crows.

*The windmill thirsting for water,
The fields forlorn and fallow—
Time departs like a crow in flight.*

CHEMOTHERAPY: A LOVE STORY

"I'm unravelling, John," she said. "I feel like a skein, spinning, splitting, thinning, like a tattered web, windblown and shredded. Insects are feasting on my dreams. A cicada is derisively trumpeting in my rib cage. Bees burble in my veins like gasoline boiling, the chemo drip as insistent as day-long 3:00 a.m. nightmares," she said as she tugged on a pink scarf the color of rosé, pale as hope, covering her remaining hair, a fringe of her diminished past.

"What can I do, Babe?" I winced, powerless against the pain shadowing her like an eclipse.

I reached for her hand, the one not infused, the one not punctured by multiple needle marks.

"Look at me," she moaned. "I'm a tapestry of stitches and seams. My skin is pixilated, a pentimento of blotches. How can you love this?" She ran her hand over her body like a painter trying to whitewash a flawed drawing.

In fact, I'd never loved her more. She was not a web of mist but tensile, tenacious, not a thin line sketching a portrait of possibilities, but a canvas gouged by fingernails, grasping at life.

FLOORBOARDS CREAKING

I walked across his bedroom floor, each creak the whine of timeworn wood, and heard him in each step I took, the wood recalling the life he'd led. I stepped through his days from youth to age.

I saw him playing sandlot ball, his hands small in that Ty Cobb mitt, his winter-wheat hair sprouting from his blue ballcap.

He called for the pop fly, shouting "mine, mine. I got it Duke," windmilling his arms, kicking up dust under the April sky, his youth the promise of green in spring.

I saw him trudging through Korean snow, he and his squad away from their homes, adrift in a land cold and troubled with war.

"We can do this men," he said though young. "Hang tough against the want, the wear, and fear. Think back to home where our folks stand strong," his voice cracking in ice-shattered thoughts.

I saw him toting my mom in her sleepless turns, she on his shoulder through bat-flight nights.

"Come on sweetie pie. Time to nod off. I got work tomorrow, baby girl. You need your sleep to grow up big and strong. Let me tell you sugar, life's gonna throw you some curve balls so you gotta be ready. Get that sleep, sweetie," warm in his arms.

I saw him bent over bills stacked high, a pencil nub marking digits denied. He'd sit at their kitchen table, Formica scarred by watermarks, fretting to grandma.

"Man o' man, Sue. How the hell I'm gonna pay these damn bills? Electricity, water, food, me making \$5 an hour at the feed and tack store? Working 10 hours a day. Weekends too," grandma kneading his tight shoulders, muscled from his lifting bridles and bits, shoes and saddles.

I saw him curse when my mom's curfew passed, him worried some boy's drunken drive on ice, storm-glazed or lightning-struck streets.

"Shoot and dadgummit. I warned her about coming home late. I said I'd sit up all night till she came back. And it ain't anger, you know. It's pure damn fear for my little girl! I was a boy once too. And I ain't proud of who I was or what I thought, about girls specially. All I see now is some dumbass kid drinking, driving, and her in danger," as he checked his watch again for the umpteenth time.

I saw him walking her toward a canopy set up in the house for her bridal day, his feet scuffing the floor in stumbling steps, his best boots shined with the brush stamped U.S. Property he took home with him from the Army after his stint in Korea.

"You're doing great dad," my mom said, she the mature one, as he dabbed his eyes with her frilly pink handkerchief.

Then I came along, 14 months after the wedding, his first grandson. In time he became my best friend. In his hallway, grandma pissed about us breaking her trinkets, we'd toss a baseball. I wore his Ty Cobb mitt, the one he'd oiled to a caramel patina, my pride of possession. We played hide and seek, me in his closet, hiding behind his Sunday suit smelling of Pall Malls. Me under the stairwell by the root cellar, brushing away cobwebs.

"Where you at, boy?" he'd laugh, knowing all of my favorite hiding spots. "I'm coming, you little devil," and then I'd laugh too as he clumped his big feet after me, making picture-show monster snarls and howls. He sounded more like a hoot owl to me, but I'd never tell him that.

Now he's lying in his bed, bricks lifting the head to help drain his phlegm and clear his lungs. A life of smoking unfiltered drags, a life bent under the family's care. He's trying to talk to me, but all that comes out of his mouth is spittle and a rasp like angry bees. I'm standing beside him, wiping his mouth, soothing his brow. A wisp of gray, a lock misplaced. My feet paining as the floorboards creak, telling the story of his life, and mine.

FOUR BOARDS SQUARED

When she trudged from the gravesite, her hands still
dusted with dirt clods thrown, the loss not seared
but gone dormant like seeds in winter chill,
sunk down, burdened with low light and frozen earth,

she wheezed as wind through wooden slats, splines
broken out, nailed back askew. Her face webbed
as winter dew, mascara misaligned
like exclamation points, smothered screams dampened,

she stepped on November's leaves, hard as steel
shovels biting into frosted clay, tossed
clumps thudding on pine planks to time reeling.
I'm undone, Jim, she moaned. My path is lost.

One rose on the ground loosed from a bouquet
shone yellow in the lessening light's gray.

GONE

*An empty chair
Dockside at low tide
Gray seas serrating*

"Joan, when did you lose him?" Sue asked, new to the trailer park, living just two double-wides down from Joan.

When, that's the question, Joan thought. He died exactly 28 days ago, pulmonary infarction the medical chart in the VA hospital said. But he had gone long before that.

Over 700 days before his death, he started leaving. Pieces of him fell away like a worm-holed structure, termite-ridden, leaving trails of sawdust on the floor. The doctor declared early onset dementia.

*Eyes blurred in
Cataract grayness
Underton depression*

She lost him when he left behind civility, angering easily at minor infractions.

"Why's this damn chicken so rubbery, girl. Can't you cook no better than this!" he'd scream. "You call this bed making! I've seen tighter corners from my raw recruits," he'd shout in his gruff Army sergeant tone.

She lost him when he lost his way. A reconnaissance specialist in Afghanistan, he always found his target through dead reckoning. But one day, he left their trailer at 11:00 a.m. By 3:00 p.m., she was worried. At 6:00 p.m., she asked her neighbors to help her search. She found him at 8:00 p.m., shivering by the dock.

"Hey Ben. What are you doing? We've looked everywhere."

He turned to her, his eyes vacant, black as seabed churn, and said, "I went for

a walk, somehow ended up here, but I don't know where here is."

She lost him when he lost his memory. Once she went into the den, and he said, "Hello mam, may I help you?" ever the gallant officer but without a hint of recognition. Or she'd enter their kitchen, and he'd look at her with fear, shuddering, "Why are you here? What do you want? Leave or I'll call my wife."

She lost him when he lost his words. He'd try to speak, but his words were like waves rippling toward shore, never reaching land. His thoughts were like a stone thrown into the bay, sinking into silt, creating concentric circles that diminished into emptiness.

She'd lost him before the dementia. He joined the Army two years after their marriage and shipped out for his 12-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. He returned with PTSD pinned to his shirt like a service medal and terrors wrapping him like concertina wire. At night he shouted out dead men's names like bloodied words from a bitten tongue. In the day he narcotized with bottles of Budweiser, French kissing their long necks like a lover.

"Joan. I wondered when you lost him," Sue asked again.

Breaking from her reverie, Joan said, "Last month. We were happily married for two years," not telling Sue that he had been gone much longer.

Gray waves crenulated
Like coffin liner cloth
Lunar eclipse ingested

HANK IN HOSPICE

Bedridden, infected by COPD, coughing spores like spring weed blossoms spewing seedlings, an orchestra of atonal allergens, I'm lighting my Pall Mall Reds, unfiltered, watching the smoke tendrils weave graveside garlands as ashes sift downward in gyres of despair.

"How ya doin', Hank?" my caregiver asked. "Can I bum one of them cigarettes from ya?" He lit his off mine, the two burning butts meeting in conflagration near the third circle of hell.

I coughed again, my phlegm orchestrating new disharmonies as wheezes crackled through my lattice-worked lungs, my face sallow, the color of parchment soaked in nicotine, the color of cheap rye whiskey, my eyes red-rimmed, looking like a miner's pit glowing ravaged fire.

"How am I doing you ask?" taking a deep drag of tar and terror. "I'm bedridden. My cheeks are sunken like a truck hood, hailstorm-dented, rusting in a used car lot and some fool has put a sign on me saying, 'Barely Runs, Good for Scrap.' I'm dust. I'm sifting toward perdition, and I wish the chariot would hurry up and get here. That answer your question?"

SUNSET DIORAMA

In late August, along
the beach at Costa Mesa,

when sunset stroked
the sea's ripples like

harpsichord notes,
each wave flutter

glimmering as weak
starshine in gray dusk,

I'd hold dad's hand
as we walked the sand,

our feet marking progress
like notes on a staff,

his step bass to my treble,
and he'd hum Vince Gill's

"Go rest high on that mountain"
in the deep rumble of sea surf

or quote Shakespeare, our world
a stage, his exit cachectic,

he as fragile as the jellies
washed ashore by low tide,

drying into airlessness.
Their medusa nettles sting still.

TERMINAL

Look it up. Webster's defines it as "end of the line, Bud. You're on your way out." My doctors agree. Lung cancer, terminal. And I feel it. I'm breathing like a 1957 Ford truck with a bad carburetor, huffing, puffing, wheezing. Every bone in my body rattles. My tires are flat, and moss is cementing me to the asphalt. My side panels aren't just rusting. They're eaten through as if my innards are corrosive. That's not even the worst news. No food. I get no steak and potatoes on my way out. I get no lemon meringue pie or even sweet tea. Nope. Instead, I get a plastic tube through my nose, pumping something yellowish into me, like Satan's sulfur. It reeks of seaweed flavored with acetone saturated in the chemical waste from a water purification plant peppered with hand sanitizer and a whiff of putrefied compost.

But I've put one over on them. My friend, the only one who visits me in my hospice cell, sneaks in booze. I'd say, "rot gut," but that would be a pun, given my body's status. So when the nurses are off doing their nightly recordkeeping and the place is morgue quiet, usually around 2:47 p.m., I creep out of bed, dragging my various wires, tubes, and hanging bags, my *accoutrement*, as my long-gone, French-teacher wife would say, her nose all primrose and lavender, twist open the metal cap from my secreted bottle of Johnny Red, take a tasty slurp, and feel the burn from the third circle of Hell. And I say, "Come and get me, you damned Harpies. I've had enough."

EMPLOYMENT

*Eight to five, daily,
minimum wages strangling
like breathing water.*



ELIZABETH MEETS DARCY AT THE 7-11

Preface

The 7-11 convenience store, 27th and Elm, Longbourn, TN, 8:30 a.m., 15 miles south of Nashville

Customers come and go, purchasing their Red Bull and lottery tickets, paying for their gas, picking up salty snacks and cigarettes. Elizabeth Bennet works the morning shift while her deadbeat father sits at home reading newspapers and tying fishing lures, while her mother frets about marrying Elizabeth's older sister Jane off to anyone with means, while Elizabeth's three younger sisters bicker. Elizabeth swallows her pride to work the cash register and serve the city's hoi polloi. From behind the counter, she sees him. He sees her. Their eyes meet.

Chapter 1 Elizabeth Bennet

(Look at him, his head tilted back as if the world balances on his chin. He stands there, looking down his patrician nose at me as if I'm a servant and he's a lord, he in his Ralph Lauren finery, mock Tudor tailoring—an ascot? In Longbourn, Tennessee?)

"Yes, sir. How can I help?" (I bet he has a personal trainer, someone to walk his dog, an assistant to buy his groceries, doing nothing on his own to mar that perfect manicure.)

Chapter 2 Darcy Fitzwilliam

(She's gorgeous, in a common way. It's a shame such a potentially beautiful woman is stuck slumming in a 7-11. With better breeding and position, she could be worthy, of me. But who can help their parentage? Some of us have privilege, others don't.)

"A double mocha macchiato, large, with extra whip, decaf, light ice, and please hurry. I've got an important meeting to attend. I'm the owner and landlord of Pemberley Estates, the four-building apartment complex on Lambton Way," he said, sniffing. "You probably have friends and relatives who live there, I

dare say. It's quite affordable."

Chapter 3 Elizabeth

"No, I don't have any friends or relatives who live at your apartment complex. We actually have homes, with driveways and fences and backyards and swing sets and double car garages and neighbors who mow their lawn and cookout on barbeque grills on patios and . . . and . . .," Elizabeth fumed at his insolence, his prejudice, his lordly manner. "And, *I dare say*," she mocked, "does this look like a Starbucks? Do you think I'm a barista, dude? If you want a double mocha whatever you said, here's how you do it. You turn left," she said pointing with angry pride, "go to the coffee station by the wall, pull out a cup from the dispenser, put it under the spigot, poke your finger at the coffee option of your choice. They're all listed clearly on the machine," she huffed. "Then, you wait for the coffee to burble into the cup. Next, you come back to my counter where I tell you how much you owe. And you pay. Get it! I'll serve you, if you're next in line, but I'm not your servant!"

Chapter 4 Darcy

(Oh my gosh. With her face flushed in anger, she's even more gorgeous. Her spirit. Her pride. Her elegant defense of her family and friends. I've dated women who only want me for my possessions, and those women have been pale and pitiful in comparison to this animated and forceful young woman.)

"Miss, I am dutifully admonished. I must say, you have moved me with your words. And though I struggle to accept the differences in our caste, you of little means, working in this 7-11, and I of immense wealth, I succumb to my feelings. I can no longer be repressed. Please allow me to state how ardently I admire you. Would you accompany me on a date? Perhaps coffee, elsewhere than in this convenience store?"

Chapter 5 Elizabeth

(Stunned. Even more furious.)

"Buddy, you have offended me in every way possible with your presumptions

about my family and friends. From the moment you entered this store, you have worn arrogance like an ascot, conceit like a cappuccino. You could never tempt me with your officiousness. In fact, you are the last man I would ever consider as a date.” Elizabeth crossed her arms, pursed her lips, and glared at Darcy.

(He backed out of the store slowly, still looking at her, she looking at him.)

Afterword

That evening, while she lay in bed next to her sister Jane, Elizabeth replayed the incident in the 7-11. She roiled with anger at the man’s rudeness, but something about him kept nagging at her. Something about him was as a magnet drawing her affections.

“Elizabeth,” said Jane. “I’ve tried to imagine what kind of man you would be happy with, and I think I’ve figured it out. You need a man whose personality is as strong as yours. I hope one day you find him. You deserve someone who sees your strength and is equal to you in temperament—your pride matching his. Then you could maybe get away from that terrible job at the 7-11.”

LOVE/LOVELESS

Act 1. You and me

Filets of trout perfectly browned in warm butter beside a quartered lemon slice on two Wedgewood plates. A carrot-sculpted rosette. Two glasses of rosé. Brown, yellow, blue, orange, red passion. "I'll have iced tea; she'll have water." The server left us alone to hold hands in the flickering light of a candle, the shape of light caressing your face like breezes rustling a redbird's feathers.

Act 2. Her

I just want someone. Why can't I find someone? They come in here every week, sit at the same table, hold hands, never see me, see only each other, like I'm a distant noise, a car crash in some other neighborhood, a solar flare whose eruption won't affect their climate-controlled environment, a damned iceberg calving, dissolving into the sea, disappearing into atoms small enough to be carried on the waves of their love sighs.

Act 3. Me

You caulk the seams between my stone edges and your seamlessness. You are chocolate drizzled on my finger to lick. Let my thumb inscribe circles on your palm to plot roads we'll travel. Let my tongue touch your tongue and speak of time and song.

Act 4. You

You help me see light in different colors. The other men I've known have been as cataract, their needs obscuring my vision of self. "Come on, babe, just this once, I promise." "Hey, get me a beer, won't ya'," he'd say while scratching his lazy ass. "Let me tell you what I think." "That chick friend of yours has a big mouth, always goin' on about her this or that. I mean, who gives a you-know-what?!" You listen. You take the words I speak and weave them into garlands.

Act 5. Her

Four more hours of this shift. Burning my hands on hot plates, my soul searing in loss. Then what? An empty night of Hulu. Bottles of Bud diesel clanking against my teeth, the sound resounding throughout my hollow apartment. Endless loops of “Beautiful Pain,” Eminem screeching in AK-47 staccatos, “Yesterday was the tornado warning/Today’s like the morning after/Your world is torn in half/. . . It’s like an enormous asthma.”

Those two, sitting at the table, eyes gone, and fondling each other, their hands linked like a bridge joining his hemisphere to hers.

I’m falling, my gravity gone and I’m reeling into ether, nothing tethering me. Loveless. I want. And my want echoes.

THE WEIGHT OF WANT

When Covid closed the café, 12th and Main, where I bussed tables and took orders, \$7.29 an hour and found, the boss said, “No problem, Sid, we’ll be back soon, but for now I need to let you go.” No problem

my ass, me with the two kids and Mary long gone. I left, the juke moaning “I can’t get no,” and trudged home, shirt stained with ketchup, my hair grease streaked, as if clawed by predators,

the whole world a wolf’s howl, but I could keep the kids fed and the rent paid, barely, spooning up beans and bread heels as hard as shoe tongues, watered-down milk and stale cereal, into the night’s

hollow like an empty well, mending their thrift store clothes with thread-thin wishes. Now, eight months into the pandemic, the diner only at half shift, my unemployment check dissipating like a retreating

contrail from my damned senator’s departing jet, no stimulus package passed, I sit at my kitchen table consuming bills, facing affliction, eviction, both kids starting to cough, their wheezes like

air from flattening tires. Lines in my face etch deeper with each click of the clock’s second hand, the ticks like nails hammered into coffins. I feel the weight of want, head bowed heavy to the pull of earth’s gravity.

WOMEN'S HISTORY 101

"How many times do I have to be sneered at, have my ass pinched, get left a quarter tip, wipe up after some kid spills syrup on the floor, get stiffed when a guy skips on his bill then pay out of my pocket-change earnings, pour scalding coffee on my arm, cut myself on a broken plate, accept minimum wage with a smile that hurts my teeth, be hectored by complaints—"Hey girl, I didn't order this, and I ain't paying for it" or "This ice tea's from the bottom of the pot, tastes like old socks!" or "My soup's too cold" or "My water's too hot,"—be ignored, while I'm standing at their table to take their order, while they're talking about me, like I'm roadkill to be driven over, like I'm a fence post, like I'm a mailbox with my flag down waiting for a message, then lose a job when the cafe goes under, stand in line at the unemployment bureau with other women whose makeup is smeared with tears, whose eyes are as red as their hot water-scalded hands, whose dresses are torn and mended with mismatched thread, whose ring fingers on the left hand show a tan line where a ring had been?" she huffed breathlessly.

"And my mom did it before me. How damned pitiful is that? I could have seen it coming. I'd watch her get up at 4:00 am to make the morning shift at some shithole restaurant run by a sleazebag. She'd struggle into a too tight uniform so her breasts might get her more tips. She'd dye her hair with store-bought henna so she might get more tips. She'd put on bright red lipstick so she might get more tips. And at the end of her ten-hour shift, her feet barking, her arms weak from carrying trays, she'd count off soiled bills that added up to more lost wages than hours worked. Then the next day, she'd do it again, until her hair started falling out from teasing it, until her tight uniforms fell slack on her thinning body, until her eyes looked empty as dry wells. And here I am repeating history. I see my future in the reflection of a diner's yellowed Formica tabletop, scarred."

TRUCK STOP

“Hey, little girl. How much?” the traveler asked as he put his three cans of chewing tobacco and six pack of Bud Lite on the counter.

I wasn’t little nor was I a girl, unless you think a widowed, 27-year-old, single mom with two kids, ages 3 and 5, was a girl.

“Yes sir, that’ll be \$16.75.”

“What the hell! That’s highway robbery,” as if I set prices in the Stop and Go Truck Stop.

I’d heard it all before, having been called “honey child,” “baby face,” “sweetie pie,” and “pumpkin.” I’d been propositioned. “Cutie, I got an hour and \$60. What do you think?” as the toothless trucker grinned, rank from having driven miles behind a wheel, sucking in diesel fumes on the road. I’d been hollered at for being too slow when a customer had to wait for his sour grape slushie and bag of Fritos. “What’s the holdup, young lady? I got someplace to go, you know,” the man screamed at me. “You gettin’ paid by the hour?”

I was. I worked 50 hours a week for minimum wage, my two babies in daycare at the nearby church, unless my mom could help out, if she wasn’t drunk that day. The minimum wage was just enough to keep me off welfare but not enough to get us through the month. Sure, I got widow’s pay from the U.S. Army, Dan having been blown up in Iraq, them sending home all that was left of him, body parts that only God’s DIY kit could put together, his boots too big to wear, and his Army-issued Timex.

We did OK, me and the kids, eating ketchup sandwiches on day-old bread, beans from the 57-cent bent-can aisle, watered down milk, and an occasional head of lettuce, just turned a bit black on the edges. “Tell you what sweetie. I’ll give it to you for a quarter. That do you?” the grocer leered, adding, “But I done you a favor, right? Maybe I deserve one too,” as if every single mom was

a green light, a doormat for stray dogs.

I'd serve customers traveling through Texas going west to Santa Fe, north to Denver, south to New Orleans, their license plates from every state I'd never seen. They'd stop in our store for gas and gewgaws, a keychain with spurs, a coffee mug reading "Don't Mess with Texas," a snow globe with a hula girl from a state where it never snowed and didn't have hula girls.

The travelers were on their way to mountains I'd never crest. They'd smell ocean scents I'd never smell, their kids playing on the beaches where my babies would never build fairy sandcastles. My customers would dine on cornfed steaks from Kansas, while my family ate mac and cheese. They'd drink café au lait in the French Quarter while I sipped on truck stop stewed coffee made the night before.

It was 4:00 p.m. in the Stop and Go, lull time between lunch and dinner. I felt tired. My feet hurt from standing already seven hours with another three to go. Out the rain-stained front window of the truck stop, I could see the highway overpass. People were going somewhere. I wasn't. I looked down at Dan's watch. His Timex had stopped ticking.

I CAN'T GROW

I can't grow wind he said to her
as he stood in the field once black
from prairie fire once rich in topsoil
now the shade of cadavers just dead

Gone where life had grown his family
gone too parents and grandparents and
even prior generations like seasons
remembering rows of crop and hands

Turning now what turns is the rows of
windmills that loom and lurch metal
beasts that whirl like locusts eating
not breezes singing within the stalks

The bank that repossessed his legacy
withered on spent vines suggested wind
sell air they said your day's done let the
windmills work the land you failed

What spins are my hands wringing
calloused knuckles grinding skin
once tanned and creased and split
a map for my children to follow

That map useless as dry parchment cracked
what can I do he wailed with idle hands
sit and watch time spin shadows on our
land now the bank's I can't grow wind

PROGRESS

I saw him hollow
my father's substance emptied

once returning from the war
to inherit our mom and pop

corner store from his father-in-law
selling lettuce but not arugula

mushrooms but not shitake
giving credit to neighbors in need

pay me later when you can no problem
waving to friends from the store door

knowing everyone's first name and
their kids' favorite ice cream flavors

how Aunt Rose was feeling after her fall
and whether John had gotten his new job

but then the superstore moved in like an
eclipse progress selling pear infused balsamic

without credit without recognition of
neighbors but more stock cheaper

undercutting his margins and community
like blood draining platelets bruising

and our corner store sank like a patient
amputated into a hospital bed

he then waved at friends as they drove
past the door like an open casket he a

widower at a wake while he sold off
perishables then can goods at discounts

finally equipment shelving meat saws
and grinders until the store hollowed

became skeletal the fossilized floor
scarred where feet once walked marred

from phantom pain and I watched him
evaporate the store excised in progress

SELF PORTRAIT AS HOLOGRAM

Bam. Bam. Bam. Loud knocking on my door.

“Hey, you! Sam. I know you’re in there. Open this door, you hear me?”

Half in, half out of my apartment's third floor window, I started to climb onto the fire escape to avoid him, the super, not having paid my rent this month, again, for the fourth time in six months, due to having lost another job, my third in a row, if you force me to be honest.

The latest HR dude said in the exit interview, "You're neither here nor there, are you? More absent than present, more exit than arriving. Just a no-show in general, huh? We feel like we hired a fleshless phantasm, an aura of irrelevancy, an apparition of indecipherable angst, a sort of 3-D person, more spectral interference than substance. When we asked your colleagues about your work ethics, they said, 'Who?' We couldn't find anyone who remembered working with you. All I can say, Sam, is good luck." Then he ushered me to the door.

So here I am, in ether, not in a building, not on the ground, just hovering in midair, this time on a rusted, rickety fire escape barely bolted to my tenement's crumbling, 50's, post-war brick facade. I'm swaying. I'm wavering. Light beams from the surrounding buildings are reflecting through my nothingness.

I'm looking down at the weeds smothering the building's façade. As an expert on imbibable analgesics, you know, booze, I see relief, the glinting telltale signs of broken beer bottles, shards of glass sharp as scalpels honed against the rough edges of my anxiety. “A few stab wounds, a stinging laceration might help. I'd rather be a mess of self-injury than what I am now, a hologram.”

*Through the open door
Motes drifting in death spirals
The empty room screams*

LOSSES

*“She’s gone,” he moaned, each
cry plaintive as winter squalls,
ice chilling bare rooms.*



PHOTO ALBUMS

I found it in the attic, behind the armoire, cobwebbed in darkness and time, a photo album faded as Kodachrome and loss, and on the pages, slanting askew from yellowed paste, I saw my father.

He stood in a row with other men, waiting. They wore starched uniforms in khaki, bad haircuts, white skin above their ears where hair had hidden the sun, rifles held tightly in anxious hands, and ashen faces. War had arrived, the country's isolation repealed by dawn attacks at Pearl Harbor.

Decades later, I stood as he had, my haircut as bad, my uniform as starched, my fears agitated as rotor wash. I wouldn't board landing craft at Normandy like him, the Channel choppy with blood, bunker bombs spewing death from Nazi strongholds, shrapnel shredding skin like concertina wire.

I trudged through sand in Iraq, IEDs awaiting each step like vipers, desert heat dripping dread, bodies exploding to repeal an enemy's 9/11 attack. My troop had taken photos, too, one day to be stored in darkness. We stood in line, young men pretending strength, waiting. From the album, I felt my father's eyes, his past overlaying my present like a specter of prophecy.

Past and future

A mirror reflecting

The shadow of winter trees

HOMELESS

The grate at 8th and Main breathed warm air
against the December cold so I claimed
it as home unfurling my newspaper
sheets reporting Dow gains and cardboard bunker
unpacking my random cans and jug of
Johnny Red next to my camo backpack
my pinned purple heart hanging like clotted blood

I had fought for land before as squad leader
3rd Marines Desert Storm leading 12 men
toward smoke and sand commanding resources
not sufficient for a resume so fighting
for God and country led to life under bridges
and food foraged from dumpsters I lie on
the grate my face etched from metal like strafing scars

LIKE SNAKESKIN GLISTENING ON THE BEACH

We were just jostling, you know, kids on the pier's edge trying to impress the girls, they in their bikinis, we in our cutoffs, and the water looked clear, at least I thought, no crags, blue-black depth, so I pushed him, giggling, in the August sun and glanced at Susie in her swimsuit glistening like snakeskin on the beach, her laughter a siren song hissing through the summer sky like the sea nymph Circe in pigtails, and he fell reaching out to me half in fun half in horror and tumbled backwards, so he hit head first his neck the doctor said breaking on impact, I recalled telling his mom, my eyes welling, tears trickling down my face like beads of venom.

*raptors circle
beneath cloud cover
the land accepts darkness*

AFTERTHOUGHT

I liked the diner's fried-grease air
like breathing in decades of meals
now past, the aroma lingering on the
yellowed tables, on the footprint floor,
on the ketchup-stained menus,

and I can see my family's Sunday suppers,
back when grandpa sat at the table's head
like Elijah. He'd wear his best black suit,
the serge shining through the elbows,
his threadbare shirt washed more times

than his bible had verses, starched stiff
in the gospel, and I'd see travelers come
and go like calendar pages turning,
like pilgrims to a shrine. They'd nurse
a cup of coffee, their heads bowed

over the black steam, the steam
clouding their dreams deferred,
and wear work clothes brown from
the land's dirt, as brown as the grease-fire
that hung in the air, brown as a sepia

photo in a family's discarded album.
Their eyes pooled in their coffee cup's reflection,
the diner's harsh light against the night's
darkness, their moment of rest in a worn booth,
plastic seats torn like a map, each crack a

destination sought, a path missed.
The diner's gone, buried under a 4-lane
highway running north to south.
Memories rising from the east and setting
in the west are afterthoughts.

SEPIA

They had a barn, pride of possession, poets of old called it *mimesis*, so my whiskey-soured professor said, when wood and fields reflected their green life, reflected his love for her. Their barn was nailed tight at right angles, the beams planed straight, hinges oiled, hay raked. The barn rested in a tended field, spring-alive from the windmill's well water clear and deep. Apple trees in their orchard bloomed fulsome. And he tended the barn and land lovingly, thinking of her with each nail hammered, each scythe swept, each apple plucked and polished, under pink skies where even clouds promised the scent of rain. And he whistled Willie Nelson's "Always on My Mind." He could see her in the farmhouse window.

Then stage four arrived like an in-law, a counselor's note sent home to reprimand, and she was gone, in weeks, her breathing the rasp of filed metal.

In time the barn's beams swayed in decay, his attentions distant, his eyes vacant. Doors hung askew on rusted bolts, stalls echoed as empty as wormed wood, and mice entered sibilant, filling his void with mischief, their scurrying feet the chatter of thrown bones. The windmill shattered, lightning struck, its blades airless in the farm's dead breeze, and the field's grass dried like barbed wire, cicadas screaming in the summer heat.

One dusk, he drank boiled coffee, more dregs than beans, left fried eggs to dry ochre on ignored plates, and packed his truck: their bedspring with splines spent, a bentwood rocker, its wicker seats unraveling, and his Martin guitar, strings sprung, sound hole stuffed with calendar clippings of lost birthdays and anniversaries.

He turned the truck onto a rutted road, dusty with a past harvest's wheat chaff, and left his life, once green, now the color of sunset under cloud-worried skies, the color of sepia.

SNAPSHOT, MARY IN THE OLD FOLK'S HOME, CHRISTMAS, 2023

She stood at the window, lace drapes half drawn,
the sky darkening at dusk, darkening under sullen skies,
the sun setting behind the gray overpass like doubt
beyond the blackening snow, cars traveling, away.

She breathed out a deep sigh that rattled in her chest
like mice scurrying in the dark and sucked in smoke
from her Pall Mall. Knocking the ashes on the floor,
staring at them as they sifted downward in a slow gyre,

she whispered to herself, "Used to care. Used to fill my life
like a grocery cart at Christmas. Used to leave apple pies
on the kitchen countertop, shiny in red, glazed with sugar,
when life was sweetness. Now, pies and my sated sweetness

have been replaced by dust and ashes and this gray of snow at dusk,"
she in her one-room allotment paid by the boys like a one-way ticket
punched, a page torn out of her scrapbook, wadded up, tossed in the corner.
A bluebottle fly hushed against her windowsill, the only sound

in her silent room. Her men had gone, the boys off to cities
for jobs away from the land, highways replacing haybales.
Joe, her husband of 43 years, was heart-stopped dead,
the land and farm work whittling him to a nub.

Now, she was as a Christmas tree, propped in the corner, unadorned,
dry, needles littering the floor, thirsting. Looking up from the ashes,
she stared out her window at the emptiness of snow, desperate light
seeping in like a lost guest, the empty sky punctuated by crows

flying away, black ellipses against the gray clouds.
A skeletal cell tower in the distance promised no reception.

STARS ACHING IN DISTANT SKIES

2:47 a.m.

Distant skies are aching.

A locomotive's lonesome
whine weaves between

the Cuyahoga hills.
Voles fleeing foxes skitter

in the undergrowth outside
my bedroom window,

then a silenced scream, bones
crunching. The spigot in my

bathroom drips, its rhythm
the beat of a Hank Williams song.

I'm lying in bed sipping on a Chivas
to numb my ache. The night weighs

on me like stars extinguishing, sizzling
as cigarette butts thrown into my

near empty liquor glass.
The locomotive will quiet

soon to an absent moan,
lost in the dark hills, the train

heading toward the track's end.
2:47 a.m.

SUNSHINE ENTERS LIKE A HESITANT GUEST

I'm alone in the room's darkness.
Sunshine enters through the east window

like a hesitant guest, but shadows still hold
me bowed, behind me in doubt, in want, in need.

It's hard to forget what's been said . . . or
which words I never stated.

Where are they now, my family from once?
Dan's gone, of course, disease reclaiming

the past, his cancer a needle's prick in my
love, a scar that won't heal, now bandaged

on my arm like old age scabbing, failing to heal.
The kids are displaced, Dan Jr., wife Molly, and his family

to Chicago, Sue Beth and her son (her husband
disclaimed, barely a mote sifting in stale air) to Seattle.

They write, now and sometimes, maybe Christmas or Thanksgiving
("Hi Mom. How's the farm? Abilene still hot in September?

Still cold in May?). No one visits. ("It's so far, Mom, especially with no
direct flights to Kansas." "We're pretty busy with our jobs, you know."

"Money's kind of tight right now." "Molly's still peeved at what you said.")
Mostly, the house is quiet, except for crows cawing blackness in the fields

and the sewing machine whirring like mice nibbling memories in dark
corners.

I could make little Georgie a cap for Seattle's winter. I could sew Mary

a white blouse for her confirmation. Though I don't have their addresses.
The clothing would sit on my bedstand with other loose threads.

A·BAN·DON (Ə'BANDƏN)

Noun: My room was dark in abandonment

Adjective: An abandoned Christmas tree,
hospice-delivered but forgotten,
leaned against a corner void
to my right. No tensile streamers.
No string of colorful lights.
Dry needles littered the floor,
thirsting.

Verb, past tense: Ambient light
like a lost guest seeped in through
the window to my left. A dim glow
had abandoned the wintery gloom,
sun setting behind disturbed
clouds reflecting gray snow.

Noun: I could hear but not see cars
speeding with abandon, their whoosh
the sound of my intubation wheezing,
heading rapidly toward a hazy destination.
Minutes before, my caregiver had read
the chart hanging from my bed like an
amputated foot. “How are you?” he asked,
but his phone interrupted.

Verb, present participle: He held up one finger
in pause, said, “Got to get this. Be back soon,”
before he left the room abandoning me to silence.

Adjective: From my window, I saw a skeletal
cell tower, out of service, no reception. An
abandoned grocery cart, wheel-deep in snow,
sat empty in the cold field, wind whistling through
it as a marrowless bone flute to awaken specters.

Noun: I was dark in abandonment.

A TRUCK IN SNOW

He parked the truck beneath the oak behind the barn across the lake then handed the keys to his younger brother Hank with a backslap and wink, walked to her and said, “Don’t worry, Beth, I’ll be fine, you know me, always careful,” and hugged her, kissed her, and turned toward the road, a bus waiting.

2004, spring, the oaks in bud, starting to leaf out. He was off to Iraq, they said, but whoever really knows. Once on the bus, he waved to the family through fly-specked windows, they waving back, and he was gone, dust pluming on the country road. Beth wrote daily, at first, and waited.

No news, but the family said, “He’s busy, probably, girl. He’ll write when he gets a chance,” and spring became summer. The truck sat beneath the oak, baking in the Kansas heat, the sun radiating off the truck’s red panels, the truck’s hood pinging in the heat, like a heart beating.

She wrote weekly, her time taken up with chores, and she waited, and she was pregnant. No news,

but the local paper reported heavy fighting near Al Anbar, where he was maybe stationed, so the family said, “Stay calm, Beth. He’s involved. He’ll be fine. You know him, always takes care.” In autumn, the leaves fell, littering the truck with pastels, leaves stuck to the truck’s windows like lost letters. Beth wrote weekly, mostly, but sometimes a month would go by.

No news, and she was 5 months and showing. The house was heavy with quiet. No one in the family talked about the war, anymore. When winter hit, snow covered the truck, covered the oaks, covered the barn, iced the lake, and the farm was iced in fear, like nighttime chills.

The baby was born after that first snow, a boy they named after him, his father gone to war. Another truck stopped by the house later that winter, and a man got out. He tugged down his khaki dress uniform jacket, straightened his tie and hat, and looked toward the house with downcast eyes, eyes that were tired

from telling tales before. He plodded through the snow with heavy boots. Before he knocked on the door, Beth opened it, the baby on her hip, her eyes starting to redden like his truck in the snow, buried in cold.

News had finally arrived.

PRESSURE

633 nautical miles, north by northwest of Anchorage, he died, his crabber capsized by 20-foot sea swells, the wave crests a crowd of terror swamping his ice-encased ship sinking into a vortex of undertow, bow broken, crosstree snapped, outriggers wailing in siren moans. A distress buoy blinked red in the black night.

Eighteen hours later, 633 nautical miles, south by southeast of the Bering Strait, the missing ship was reported when radar reckonings showed a void in the ocean when VHF wireless attempts to rouse a response heard only static, the hiss of loss.

She learned from sea widows used to fear and foreboding, women who wore the sea's darkness like a shroud. They soothed her in words she didn't hear. "It's all right. It's OK. The sea gives to us, and sometimes it takes. We live the rhythm of the waves." They comforted her in utterances that groaned as ice floes clogging sea lanes. All she heard through the fog of their commiserations was his words.

"Just this last run, babe. If we get a catch, that'll give us money for a down payment, maybe even a truck. Then I'll stop. No more high sea's risks in high winds and bad times. We'll marry and the skies will calm," as he ran his fingers through his hair, coiled as a ship's tangled lines.

Mascara tears running down her cheeks like daggers, she went to her bedroom and saw it, her wedding dress, laid out, ready for him.

"Let it go, hon," her dad said. "He's gone, like yesterdays scratched off the calendar. But you can still have a tomorrow. Let it go."

She picked it up, toted the wedding dress heavy in cost, and hung it in the back corner of her closet, the dress's white already turning leaden as grief.

fog shrouded waves
crest in cascading fear
the land awaits darkness

POSTED

“he wrote the postcard,” she said,
her head held low in her hands,
her knuckles white, her eyes red,
“right before shipping out to the Middle East,
posted to who knows wherever Anbar is,”
he wrote, “tell you more later babe, gotta go,
we're climbing in our C-17 transport from
Naval Base San Diego, me and my squad
taking off over the ocean, the sun reflecting
like an invitation, my sarge joked, more like
hazard lights to me, but what do I know,
a grunt coming from nowhere Silent Knife,
Oklahoma, biggest body of water I'd seen
that pond in your grandpa's back 40, I can see
the lighthouse we visited up on the hill overlooking
Point Loma that day you wore blue gingham,
the color of your eyes, the color of the Pacific
at dawn the day I asked you for your hand,
me kneeling like some damned picture show star,
you laughing, a smudge of lipstick on your teeth,
you my girl then and now and forever” the card
arrived almost a year to the day after he was reported
KIA, delayed by bureaucracy, postmarked “Dead Letter
Wash, DC” she kept the postcard on the fridge
pinned like a bug in biology class and read his last line,
“see you soon, hon,” the words thumbed and fading

ESCAPE

*The door was shattered.
Wood splinters littered the floor,
but spring entered like breath.*



MAYBE HOPE

Niki's is dark even on Houston's sunniest summer days, dwarfed beneath hulking tankers, loomed over by rusted shipping cranes the size of prehistoric predators, the humidity a shroud. The Greek restaurant, frequented by longshoremen, sailors, derelicts, and denizens of the night, is located just near enough the ship channel to offer a rare breeze and a quick escape.

I went there for kabobs, bouzouki, beer, and a chance to breathe danger, to sit close to men and women with full body tattoos in bad ink, painful piercings still enflamed, and the scent of despair that permeates the café like the odor of a mongrel dog on a Houston July.

No one looks into another's eyes. No one asks questions. You sit, usually by yourself, sheathed in silence, eat curried food, and wait . . . wait for whatever might happen next when a summer squall explodes into lightning along the coast.

But I looked into her eyes, red rimmed with one streak of mascara raining down her cheek, an exclamation point to her tale.

She was Albanian, she said in broken English, as broken as her nails, dirt smudged and ragged. "I'm Besjana. Means 'belief,' in your language."

"Belief in what?" I asked.

"Don't know, maybe hope, second chance," she whispered, without conviction, as if her words struggled for air, bubbling up from an ocean's depth.

Angry voices across the room flared just then, in one of the dozens of languages spoken in Niki's, and a fight between two crewmen erupted. With the glint of a knife, everyone scrambled for safety as I scanned the room for an escape route.

When I looked back, Besjana was gone. I saw the café's door shut, like a hammerhead's jaw closing on fishermen thrown overboard at sea.

LONELINESS

I
am
waiting,
December
evincing cruelty,
shivering in isolation,
a gray sky reflecting a bare tree in a black pond.

I
am
waiting,
teetering
on the edge of doubt,
one sock on, one sock off, freezing
in your absence but yearning for love's encumbrances.

I
am
waiting,
mouse-anxious,
furtively behind
shadows of a half open door,
hoping you will find in me the promise of springtime.

I
am
waiting
for your warmth,
your body near mine
like May budding in blue and rose.
I am waiting for loneliness to succumb to hope.

WAXING MOON

From the dinghy he flung the line. It arched through salt and air, sky as green as the sea was gray, each wave uplifting the boat's bow. The hook bit deep into the foam and sank, he presumed, to fathom prey—jack or snapper, drum or blue.

He laid the pole along his knee, securing the handle with his left foot, and unwrapped the lunch Charlene had made, day old bread, mostly heels, with butter and cheese inside waxed paper, toothpick held, and saved the toothpick behind his ear.

"I gotta get me one today," he said to gulls overhead, squawking for his shrimp and shad, in the sloshing bucket by his hip. "Some to sell at Harper's Bait, maybe he'll pay me what they're worth, this time, then I'll keep a couple sprats for Char and the kids, a chowder at least with some corn or carrots. I'll stick with bread and cheese, till the sea gives up a tad. This slump I'm in can't last, I don't think."

He sat, the water in his boat as wet as the sea spray plastering his hair to his face. He hunched inside his slicker, holier than Easter Sunday, and stared into the sky's nothingness, as empty as hunger.

And waited.

The dinghy swirled in the current's eddy, drawing his line toward the stern, water vibrating on the spiller, droplets pinging the sea, the sea arrogantly nonchalant as if wetness mattered to water, as if he mattered to earth.

And waited.

"Damn all I ever do. It goes on around me, and I sit. Char's back on land, trying to stitch up some cloth, remnants mostly, and the kids playing in the dirt with toys I whittled from mossy oak. I'm out here, fishing for whatever strikes a line. Damn," the wind picking up and spray hitting him like his low-rent dad

with a belt.

“My hitch with Uncle Sam didn’t do me no good. I thought at least me learning how to fix them trucks would get me out these waters. Uh uh, no sir. Here I am, stuck like that sonuvabitch, my old man, and his before him, trying to bring up dinner from bayous and the swamps. If the weather’s good, it’s hot as a tin roof in July. If the weather’s bad, I might as well be breathing underwater for the downpours I’m sailing through.”

Just then, his fishing pole dipped, he grabbed the handle like he’d done a million times and started reeling.

“No hurry. Take her slow.” He looked north to see land, now barely a sliver on the darkening horizon, but he knew where he was, a bit southwest of Grand Chenier, maybe a mile offshore.

“Low tides running fast. Gotta reel her in before I’m pulled too far out. Char’ll worry her head off if I’m not home soon. How long I been out here?” he asked himself, still reeling. “What’s the difference. Just do the job, like our kind been doing since Jesus was in knee pants, all of us swampers with silt and seaweed in our marrow.”

He pulled up slack on the line, an inch here, a foot there, as the catch fought. He gave out line to let the catch run a bit but reeled back double, his shoulders hunched, his fists determined. Salt from the air and the sea burned his eyes. His left hand on the rod, his right hand kept spinning.

“He feels like a big one, but gotta do this. Damn fish can’t beat me. Not today.”

An hour into the struggle, an hour and a half, the shoreline no longer visible, waves crested higher as he rode farther out to sea.

Then he felt the give, the fish tiring, the line rising. He reeled faster, looking back at where land should be, where Charlene and the babies waited.

Another foot, a yard of line, the rod upright to bring the catch closer, then he dipped the rod to gather momentum, pulling the rod upright again and reeling with the savagery of a man fighting centuries of want.

And then the fish broke the surface, thrashed beaten against the boat's hull. It rolled over, a red snapper with one eye glaring.

"God damn, looky that. It's 15 pounds or more, I bet, as good as makes no never mind. Wait till Harper sees . . . no, the hell with Harper. Wait till Char sees it. I ain't selling this beauty for no beggar's change. This here's food for my babies."

He brought the snapper on board, bonged him hard on the head with his mallet, dumped the shrimp and shad bait, filled the bucket with sea water, and put the snapper in to keep it fresh.

Then, he unfurled the sail, used the tiller to turn the boat from sea to shore, and started tacking home into the wind.

"Let it blow out here for all I care," he said, his smile the glow of a waxing moon.

ANCHORS

Her life, a kelp bed of wavering crises,
daily sea churn, the undertow of indecision,
she wanted him to be anchorage.

She needed, she thought, a port
where winds calmed, where only seabirds
wheeled lazily on quiet thermals, updraft,

waves subtle in gentle ripples against a solid pier
of protective jetties, no crowd of jeering judgment.
She needed, she thought, him, a piling to moor against,

just like her father before. "Hey little girl. I'll do that
for you. You're not ready yet." Like her brothers before.
"Baby sis, not like that. I'll show you how."

On her bed lay her wedding dress, adorned in pearls,
defense against irritants. She paused, her reflection
dull in the pearls' opacity, gathered the dress in trembling hands,

walked it to her closet, hung the dress in a dark corner,
and closed the door. Then she tore her wedding invitations
into confetti and whispered to herself, "I don't need an anchor.

I deserve a sail."

AND THE MORNING SUN TRAILED HER BUS IN SHADOWS

When she turned 18, it was time, she thought, to find it, a road, a path, somewhere, anywhere. So, she packed her duds in an overnight, stole what cash she could scrounge from her ma's secret hiding place in the shoebox behind the Christmas wrapping paper on top of the outdated *People* magazines growing mold in their attic, and set off—5:00 a.m., on foot, toward the Greyhound bus depot on 2nd and Main, trying to leave the house before her mom woke for a morning shift at the Sip and Suds convenience store slash laundromat slash icehouse. Her dad was long gone, having left for a one-night bender, fifteen years ago. Walking through the still-dark streets with only dogs wailing loneliness, moths swirling around lampposts anxiously, she stepped over a crow's feather, laid low in the depot's restroom, then boarded the 7:15 a.m. bus to Amarillo, heading north, her line of destiny, she thought, traveling the direct path toward a trade, maybe wealth, or at least something akin to \$7 an hour plus tips, love, who knows, even marriage. Sitting on the bus's back row, alone, on a brown vinyl seat cracked like drought-hard clay, she wrote a note to no one in her diary, decorated with rainbows and hand-penciled hearts. She was charting a life, the morning sun trailing her bus in shadows.

*Seeking sense, shamans
wave eagle feathers above smoke.
The sound of wind applauding.*

AT MIDNIGHT

At midnight, she decided.

He'd come home late, again. Saying, "no more, Babe, I promise. It won't happen, again," just like he'd said last week, the week before, last month, every damn month.

"Trust me, Hon. I mean it," crossing his heart, like a 5-year-old having been caught taking an extra cookie from his mom's sideboard. Like a 10-year-old caught smoking behind the barn. Like a 15-year-old, when I'd bet he crossed his heart as the sheriff arrested him for killing the neighbor's kitten, wringing its neck, then hammering the cat to Mrs. Smith's red oak with four, tenpenny nails.

No more is right she thought, as he stumbled to bed, scratching his ass, kicking his lizard skin boots off.

She was through believing his pleas for forgiveness. She was through imbibing his lies, swallowing them like she'd seen him chug a can of beer, belch, wipe his mouth on his left sleeve, then crush the can. Like he'd crushed her, her trust, her hope.

As she heard him snore, all nasal and congested from his twice-broken nose, she started gathering. She picked up little Bobby, 3 years 6 months, from his thrift store crib, placing him under her right arm while she grabbed his blue teddy with her left. She'd get what she could later.

Then, she and Bobby opened his double-wide's screen door to the driveway, trying to shush the door's bleating creaks, and quietly unlocked her Honda Civic's passenger side to hook him into his car seat. She rushed to the driver's side, jumped in, turned the key, and they were off, probably to her sister Rosalee, two cities to the south.

Her Civic had 257 thousand miles on it, hard driven, maintenance rarely kept

up, typical for him, she thought. "Why tend to something when it's easier to just let it die, a price to be paid later, like all his debts," mumbling silently to herself.

She'd left the trailer, though she had wanted to tell him to get the hell out. But that wouldn't have worked. He always said, yelled more like it, when they fought over his drinking, "You don't like it, git gone, girl. This here's my house, my money's paying for it, my sweat been poured while you fetch for the little one." She had no way to counter his diatribe, his height as he loomed over her, his fists, if the drink was alive in him like a nest of coiled cottonmouth snakes. The car's rear bumper was rusted into cancerous boils from the sea air prevalent around Port Lavaca, southwest of Houston. The bumper dangled about a foot, held on by twists of baling wire. When she drove, the bumper bounced off the road, whining in the two-part dissonance of her life: potholes clanking like punches thrown, corrosion screeching, metal against metal.

As she drove, looking once into the rearview mirror, the dawn turned an angry red against the gray sky.

ONLY GEESE FLY STRAIGHT LINES

The wheel ruts scribed the prairie snow like meridians on traveler's maps, pathways evolving from now to next, lines curving in impromptu plans.

"Where to?" he asked, eyeing the sky as if clouds told tales with trusting advice.

"Try right," she answered. "I always veer toward the shadows," earth askew, trees shedding leaves in winter chill, branches bending above the pond, western shorelines pushed randomly by contrary winds.

"You think it's there?" he asked again.

She breathed in deeply, held a sigh like a wish, then weaving her arm in his, said, "Let's try."

*A crow in flight,
canting left, curving right.
The wind seeks uncertainty.*

PALE GREEN AND GARNET

Her dress, once green with hope, now pale as roadside milkweed, was washed daily, worn daily to threadbare. She and Don had no money, he said.

"Trying hard, babe. Get up, drive them 60 miles to the oilfields southwest of Houston, my truck chugging on fumes, carburetor dang near corroded on sea salt, work on the rigs under 100-degree heat, sweat dripping down my back like cottonmouth venom, and for what? To drive back to you? For what?"

She lived in his Baytown rental, one room, hotplate, toaster, bed sprung from his weight, stained from his stain, and looked north out the fly-specked window screen, north toward what might be, could be.

She wondered if he'd get an oil strike, wondered if he'd come back flush, though he never had, wondered if he'd come back at all. Hoping he wouldn't.

She'd left Amarillo for the sun, heading south, away from the plain's wind and snow.

"Hey, girl," her friend Sarah had said. "Give it a chance, Hon. What you got to lose? Stuck here, cleaning people's houses, hiding their dirt so they think better of themselves? Go on. Make a life for yourself."

So she did. Left one cold home, ending up in another.

The radio next door to his Baytown rental was on, set to a country/western station, day and night, always playing too loud, accompanied by the clink of beer bottles and an occasional "damn you!" or "hot enough for you?" or sobs. She could hear "Stand by Your Man" through the walls. Same old mewling her mom had cried to. Generations repeating.

"Enough," she said, rooting through the room, looking for a grocery store paper sack for her makeup and empty wallet. She gave the room one final glance, saw in the window's reflection a glimpse of the red welt beneath her left

eye, stepped to the door, and flung it open, her eye cried red, as red as the glass garnet promise ring he'd given her, the one he called a ruby jewel.

BLACK STONES

Roberto and Jesus left the scorched
fields of Saltillo with six pesos,
a pocket of cornmeal, and a liter Coke

bottle of water to travel toward Piedras
Negras at the Texas border near Eagle Pass.
They trod like coyote through Mexico,

through the Chihuahuan Desert, through
saguaro thorns and dry gulch bones, threading
ICE and armed home guard, cresting buttes

under vulture eyes, climbing barbed wire fences
slicing their skin, entangling their hopes.
They sought family in Dodge City,

700 miles north through Eldorado,
beaten by sun, harried by wind,
where the brothers could work the meat plants,

travel east to Wichita to cut hay, then north to
Kansas City for apple picking, migrating with
the seasons, seeking labor wanted.

They patched their clothes with baling string,
quenched their thirst with rainbows, walked the
black stones in search of America.

EIGHT TO FIVE, FOREVER?

Eight to five. Every day. Five days a week. Four weeks a month. Eleven and three-quarter months a year, with one vacation week, unhappily given by my boss. Eight to five, over and over, again and again, stamping metal into food cans for beans and beer, punching holes into metal for pull tabs, the machinery pounding out a symphony of cicada misery until my ears ring like sirens wailing. And my hands burned from hot metal, cut from jagged edges, scarred like a roadmap through the Black Rock Desert of Nevada, land serrated by wind, sun, and despair.

"I can't take it no more, Lucille. This job, this city, this damned life we're living. It's pressed holes in me. I'm lattice work more than man. I'm a sieve. I can't hold a thought with all the noise in my head. I can't hold you with my hands a mess of mangled meat. Come on babe. What you think? We got to get out of here."

Lucille looked at him in the mirror as she ran a comb through her blonde hair, once burnished as fire-forged gold, now limp and pale as butterweed. She saw him reversed, beaten and bowed, the man she had married three years before, he a stud football player on their high school team, she a wielder of flags and pompoms on the cheer squad. She saw in the mirror their squat camper the color of smoke, a dried flower arrangement thirsting for water, a cracked vase bleeding hopelessly onto their Formica countertop, dishes crusty with last night's meal. And a distant light in the window, draped with moth-holed curtains.

She had finished her eight to five shift at the diner, five days a week, four weeks a month, twelve months a year, with no vacation time allowed, her hands burned from carrying three hot plates on her arms, piled with other people's food, while she and Bob ate rice and potatoes and catsup for their vegetable. Her hands red as denial from washing the diner's dishes, her dreams of a future draining down the diner's sink.

She got up from the dressing table, a six" x two" plank of wood swaying on

two cinder blocks scrounged from the neighbor's yard, turned to him, placed her hands on his shoulders, and said, "Yes, Bob, let's go. Now's the time." They threw their clothes into four grocery store bags, picked up their runt dog, and ran to their Ford truck, giggling like children released from school once term was over.

"Where to, babe?" Bob asked.

"Anywhere without clocks," Lucille said.

REGIFT

“How you doin’, Marie?” she asked, ignoring the more pressing questions, like since Jim died, since the kids moved from Abilene to God knows where, since Marie’s life had become as empty as a drained Coke, can crushed and tossed in the recycle bin.

“Ha,” Marie laughed like air seeping from a flattened tire. “I’m working at the thrift store off 23rd and Elm.” She paused, pushing a strand of thinning gray hair behind her right ear. “It ain’t too bad, three days a week, minimum wage and commission, given my limited work experience and my GED, having left school at age 17, pregnant with little Johnny. I get to see people dream. Clients come in with their used and torn clothes, hoping for a big consignment. Customers come in, checking all the coat pockets for a lottery ticket, hoping for a big win.”

“What’s next, girl?” she asked.

“Yeh,” Marie laughed again, this time like a windchime dancing in spring breezes. “That’s the question, ain’t it. What’s next?” Marie removed her glasses to wipe a smudge from a cracked lens. Life holds its secrets close like a dollar fortune teller at the state fair, turban askew, crystal ball purchased wholesale online. “I know what I’m doin’ this afternoon,” she said cryptically.

Marie would visit Jim. She’d weave through the headstones like a needle sewing threadbare cloth, renewing its tatters, stand over his marble grave, and remember his gifts: love, kindness, care.

Around his gravesite, Marie saw the winter’s brown grass turning green.

EAST INTO THE MORNING SUN

“I’ve had enough, Mom,” Rosie said, slumping, running her fingers through her mess of red curls, her hair as tangled as a tumbleweed thrown up against a barbed wire fence along the roads outside Amarillo. “I’ve had enough of truckers pinching my butt, enough of customers at the Stop and Go drooling over my breasts, thanks to the too tight cashier’s blouse my boss insists we wear. I’ve had enough of college students after a late-night drunk leering after me as I walk by, muttering just loud enough to hear ‘I want some of that’ or ‘Yum, that’s what I call grade A beef.’ I’ve had enough of the poor pay and late hours, and I’m really tired of having so little time with my babies. By the time I pick them up from daycare, usually late, all I can do is feed them, bathe them, and tuck them in. That ain’t quality mothering.”

“So what are you going to do?” Rosie’s mom asked.

“I’m getting out of here.”

“And what’s going to change? You’ll still be you wherever you go,” her mom said, always the defeatist.

“New day, new way, Mom. I’m not going to keep hitting rinse and recycle, like on our old washing machine. I’m going to embrace whatever waits for me.”

With that, Rosie kissed her mom, belted the kids into the back seat of her Honda Civic, 257,000 miles, held together with duct tape and hope, and drove east from Amarillo to Dallas, into the morning sun.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

DR. STEVEN M. GERSON, Professor Emeritus, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, KS, was named 2003-2004 Kansas Professor of the Year, chosen by the Carnegie Foundation. He is the co-author, along with his wife Sharon Gerson, of 13 college-level textbooks and the author of six poetry chapbooks: *Once Planed Straight: Poetry of the Prairies*; *Viral: Love and Losses in the Time of Insanity*; *The 13th Floor: Step into Anxiety*; *And the Land Dreams Darkly* (Spartan Press-KC); *There is a Season* (*Online Journal of Arts and Letters*); and *What Is Isn't*. He has published over 400 poems in many journals and is honored to have been named a finalist three times for the North Dakota State University Press Poetry of the Plains and Prairies award. Steve is most proud of his 55-year marriage to Sharon, for whom all his love poems are written, his wonderful family of Stacy, Stefani, Rob, Bobby, and for the joy of spending time with his three grandchildren: Sophia, Samantha, and Jacob. These people are the poetry of Steve's life.



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Hunger Pains

Flash Discourse by Mark Blickley

Comedy Hour

Poetry by Bruce Robinson

Delta Notes

Haiku by Jianqing Zheng

Scaring Crow

Haiku by Adjei Agyei-Baah

Dust and Rust

Haibun by Taofeek Ayeyemi

A Sweater for the Tayfel

Irish/English Haiku by Gabriel Rosenstock celebrating the art of Issachar Ber Ryback

Zen and the Art of House Painting

New and selected flash fiction by Wayne Scheer

The Selborne Haibun

Irish/English Haibun by Gabriel Rosenstock, featuring passages from THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE by Gilbert White (1720-1793)

2023

School Songs

Haiku & Senryu by Hassane Zemmouri

Being Ruth Aswawa

Poetry by Anne Whitehouse

Soldier, Sailor: Edgar Allen Poe and His Brother Henry

Academic Nonfiction by Anne Whitehouse

Tales of the Kite

Haiku by Adjei Agyei-Baah

How the Mayfly Got Its Megaphone

Prose poetry by Hekkei Huotari

Jackhammer Poems

Poetry by Ben Jacques

Six Coffees with a Madman

Experimental Fiction by Blossom Hibbert

Drops of Water

Haiku by Yuko Otomo

Irish translation by Gabriel Rosenstock

Scots translation by John McDonald

Just Looking

Haiku Sequences on the Mississippi Delta region by Jianquing Zheng

Qualm (Before a Storm)

Poetry by Bruce Robinson

Eye of the Fish

Haiga (or EKPHRASTIC HAIKU) with photography by Debiprasad Mukherjee and with Haiku in English and Irish by Gabriel Rosenstock

Experimental Storytelling: A Timeline of Complementary Realities

Experimental Discourse by Jim Meirose with an essay

and with an interview by O:JA&L Associate Editor Warwick Newnham

2024

TATTOO: A Collaboration

Haiga by Hassane Zemmouri (Haiku) and Magali Bretou (Photography)

SEEDS OF STARS

Flash Fiction by Richard Stimac

Topology

Poetry by Richard Stimac

Wolf

Poetry by Bruce McCrae

Pareidolia

Haibun by Paresh Tiwari

There Is a Season

Haibun & Short Poems by Steve Gerson

Everyday Life

Haiku by Hassane Zemmouri

Full Bright Autumn

Haibun & short-form Japanese poetry in English by Erin Castaldi

Overland Geometry

Haibun and tanka prose hybrids by Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah

Cosmic Crasher

Poetry by Sean G. Meggeson

Optimal or Not

Prose Poetry by Heikki Huotari

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Poetry by Larry D. Thomas

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(Americana) Poetry by Lynn Potts

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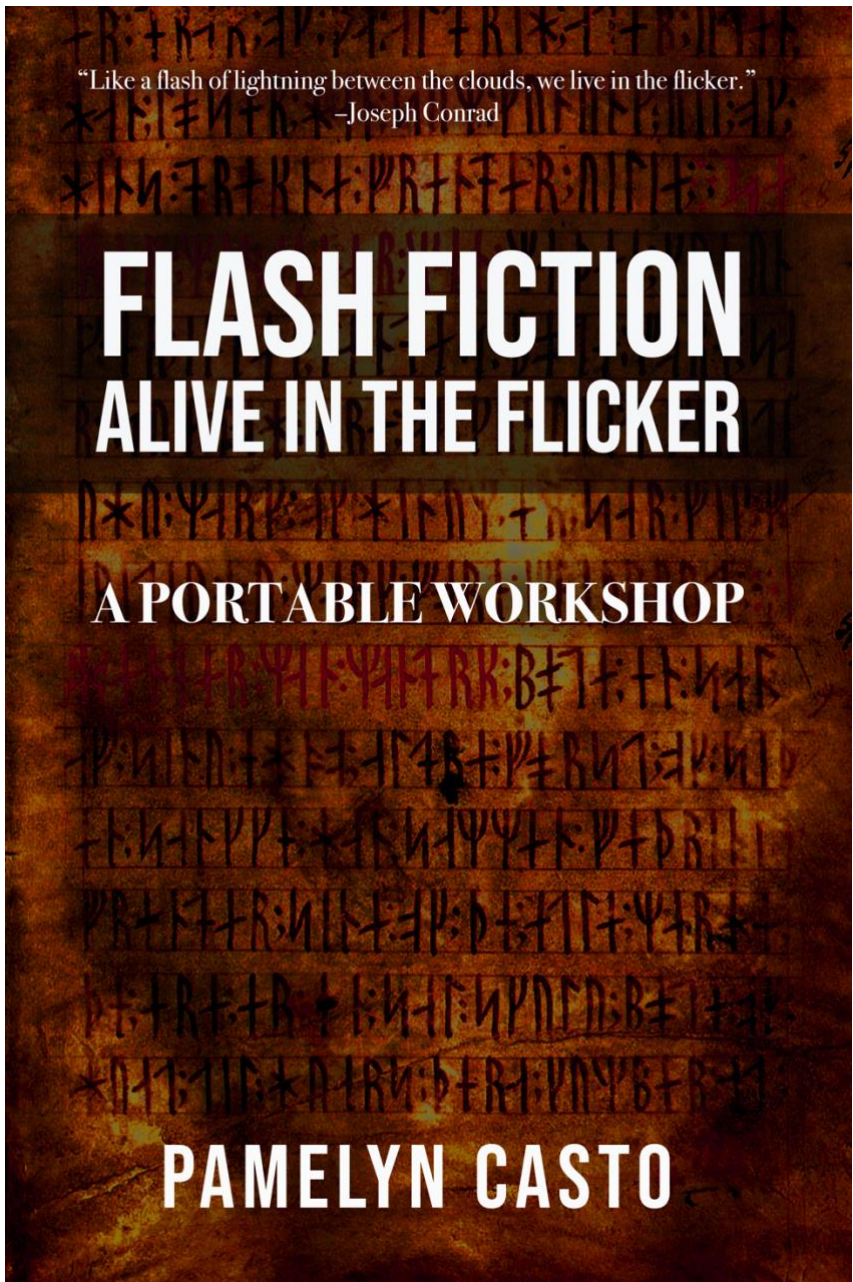
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Reviewed in the United States on August 26, 2024

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David Lignell

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Reviewed in the United States on October 5, 2022

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Reviewed in the United States on April 2, 2024

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